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# KNOWING HOW YOU FEEL: THE STRUCTURE AND IMPORTANCE OF EMOTIONAL SELF-KNOWLEDGE

by

ROBERT BOUDREAU

Under the Direction of Neil Van Leeuwen, Ph.D.

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to offer up a structure of what I call Emotional Self-Knowledge—roughly, knowledge of one’s own emotions. I begin with a broad understanding of an emotion event, according to which emotion events include a set of bodily feelings in response to some object. I then argue that knowledge of the object and the feeling of the emotion are required parts of knowing one’s own emotions *if* we expect emotional self-knowledge to be prudentially useful. I then outlining three levels of emotional self. The first requires knowledge of the feeling one is experiencing; the second requires that knowledge *plus* knowledge of the emotionally-salient object. The final level is knowledge of one’s emotional dispositions, and as such is the most robust form of emotional self-knowledge. I conclude by examining some cases in which emotional self-knowledge can be usefully applied towards an agent’s own prudential goals.

INDEX WORDS: Emotion, Self-Knowledge, Reappraisal, Emotion Regulation



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SELF-KNOWLEDGE

by

ROBERT BOUDREAU

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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SELF-KNOWLEDGE

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ROBERT BOUDREAU

Committee Chair: Neil Van Leeuwen

Committee: Dan Weiskopf

Jessica Berry

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

As we are often enough reminded, emotions are an integral part of our personal and social lives. While much attention has been paid to the ways in which emotions can interfere with knowledge, not enough, it seems, has been paid to the ways in which we come to gain knowledge of our emotions; less still to what this kind of knowledge can do for us. I will argue that knowledge of our own emotions, or what I will call emotional self-knowledge, is indeed of great importance. This is especially true, the argument runs, because it can facilitate an improvement in our actions, bringing them in line with what we might call ‘general societal expectations’—so long, that is, as we recognize some prudential reason for at least attempting to alter our emotional reactions because of the undesirable behaviors they cause (e.g., not wanting to get fired for yelling at your boss). Furthermore, it is generally considered unacceptable to make others feel bad, regardless of one’s ethical theory. The model of emotional self-knowledge on offer here aims to show why, in light of such a desire to not make others feel bad, accurate knowledge of our own emotions is a good thing to have.

One may of course wonder whether emotional self-knowledge is possible at all. Indeed, there are a number of worries concerning the very nature of self-knowledge generally. One may worry, for example, that certain of our attitudes are recalcitrant, or that we are, too some extent, self-ignorant. On the other hand, one may worry, with good reason, that our desires bias us to believe one thing over another; thus, one may be biased, for example, to not believe that their lover is cheating on them precisely because their love prevents them, in some way, from generally believing that the cheating is occurring.

There is of course much to say about these issues, though I will have little to say about them here. Instead, I want to focus on how emotional self-knowledge is a distinct form of self-

knowledge, worthy of analysis in its own right. In other words, while the broad worries cited above may in fact turn out to apply to emotional self-knowledge, and in fact may show that it is simply not the kind of knowledge we can have, it should be the case that emotional self-knowledge is undermined not in virtue of simply being a variety of self-knowledge, but rather from something distinct about the way in which emotions shape our worldviews, modify our behaviors, and enhance (or destroy) our most important relationships.

Quassim Cassam (2012) helpfully distinguishes between two kinds of self-knowledge. On the one hand, he claims, we have *trivial* self-knowledge, i.e. knowing that you believe that you are wearing socks (vii). Trivial self-knowledge is the kind of self-knowledge that philosophers generally focus on. Given that trivial self-knowledge is epistemically distinct from other kinds of knowledge—like the knowledge that this coffee table is brown, or that there is a bird chirping in one’s yard—trivial self-knowledge has always seemed a worthwhile goal.

But trivial self-knowledge is clearly not all there is to self-knowledge. There is, for example, knowledge of one’s “deepest desires, hopes, and fears, knowledge of your character, emotions, abilities, and values, and knowledge of what makes you happy” (vii). Cassam refers to this later form of self-knowledge as *substantial* self-knowledge. As he claims, substantial self-knowledge is self-knowledge that is “humanly important” and as such that it is “self-knowledge worth having” (28-29). Furthermore, as Eric Schwitzgebel (2012) argues, the Delphic oracles injunction to ‘know thyself’ is surely not about something like trivial self-knowledge; rather, he claims, “to the extent the injunction to know oneself pertains to self-knowledge of attitudes, it must be attitudes like your central values and your general background assumptions about the world and about other people” (191).

My focus here, of course, is not on all forms of substantial self-knowledge, but rather what I take to be one particularly fundamental example of substantial self-knowledge—that is, knowledge of one’s own emotions. One reason emotional self-knowledge is important, to hint quickly at what follows, is because emotions often influence our behaviors, causing us, in some way, to act. In such cases, furthermore, one’s emotional state may in fact drive one to do something morally or prudentially bad. So, when one punches a coworker who has made a particularly offensive remark, one’s anger motivates the punching which is itself, in important respects, not a prudentially beneficial action—for example, because one desires not to get fired.

The present project, then, is an attempt to outline the nature, scope, and value of emotional self-knowledge. Section 2 concerns the content and structure of emotional self-knowledge—in other words, its nature. I begin by outlining a working model of the emotions (2.1) before drawing out the content of emotional self-knowledge (2.2)—in brief, an emotion *feeling*, an emotion-causing *object*, and an emotion *concept*. I then argue that these three parts of emotional self-knowledge can produce three distinct, hierarchically structured levels of emotional self-knowledge (2.3):

1. Knowledge of what one is *feeling* (foundational emotional self-knowledge)
2. Knowledge of what one is *feeling and the object that caused the emotion* (minimal emotional self-knowledge)
3. Knowledge of one’s *emotional dispositions* (maximal emotional self-knowledge)

What I am calling maximal emotional self-knowledge is, as I will argue, the most robust form of emotional self-knowledge us humans can have, though all three levels will turn out to have a distinct effect of the way emotions affect our behaviors, beliefs, and desires. In section 3 I

argue that having emotional self-knowledge at each level is prudentially good, particularly in relation to emotional behavior (3.1), planning and decision making (3.2), and bringing our emotional dispositions in line with the kind of person we would like to be (3.3).

## 2 THE CONTENT AND STRUCTURE OF EMOTIONAL SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Karen is angry at her roommate for not washing the dishes. Karen's anger results in some bodily changes—her heart rate and skin conductivity increase, her muscles tighten—as well as some cognitive changes—her attention narrowly focuses on the object of her anger. In an ideal case, Karen knows that she is angry; furthermore, she should know *what* she is angry at—the dirty dishes in her sink. At an even more basic level, Karen should know *that what she is feeling is anger*, and that she is not confusing some other feeling for anger. The goal of this section is to elucidate how this movement—from the experience of an emotion to self-knowledge of one's emotional state—occurs.

### 2.1 A Working Model of the Emotions

I need to say something about the nature of emotions themselves. A broad classification of emotions theories divides those theories into two groups: cognitive and non-cognitive. On the non-cognitive side are theories like *feeling* theories—according to which emotions are identical to the way they feel, the most 'common sense' view, so to speak—as well as somatic feeling theories (James 1884, Lange 1885)—according to which emotions represent physiological changes caused by some external stimuli. Other non-cognitive theories include the processing mode theory (Oatley & Johnson-Laird 1987), according to which emotions can be identified by the changes they cause in cognitive faculties, like memory and cognition.

What all of these have in common, as the grouping suggest, is that they take the integral part of an emotion to be something other than cognition (or, in some of the more starkly non-cognitive theories, they deny that emotions involve cognition at all). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, *cognitive* theories take it that emotions are a primarily cognitive affair. Pure cognitive theories (Bedford 1957, Solomon 1976) take it that emotions are *identical* to thoughts. Other cognitive theories hold that emotions are triggered by cognitions. For example, Judgmentalism (Nussbaum 2001) holds that emotions are caused by the judgment of some object as having an emotional value—the snake, for example, is judged to be frightening, and it is in virtue of this judgment that you are afraid.

What I offer below is a theory of emotional self-knowledge that can proceed *regardless* of whether the cognitivist or the non-cognitivist wins the debate. The *experience* and *knowledge* of an emotion is our concern here, and thus we need to note that emotions have both cognitive and non-cognitive elements, regardless of which of these elements turn out to be essential or constitutive of emotion in some way, or merely causal. A theory of emotional self-knowledge, in other words, should be able to account for all aspects of emotion and emotion experience, and thus requires fidelity to both cognitive and non-cognitive parts.

Furthermore, we can distinguish between whatever it is we are calling an *emotion proper* and the overall experience of an *emotion event*. While the former requires some ontological commitments about what it is for something to count as an emotion—be it a certain kind of feeling state, or the application of a specific concept—an *emotion event* can include as constitutive parts all kinds of stuff that may not count as part of the emotion proper. So, for example, if one is afraid of a bear, it is not necessarily the case that the perception of the bear is part of the emotion *proper*, though it is undeniably part of one's emotion *experience*.

With the above in mind, I will frame the discussion that follows in terms of the following model of an emotion event<sup>1</sup>: (A) Sensory Input (i.e. visual) → (B) Automatic Evaluation → (C) Physical Changes/Bodily Preparedness → (D) Feeling Perception. In the remainder of this section, I focus on the role each of these parts play in an overall emotional experience<sup>2</sup>. In the next section, I will discuss more thoroughly just those parts that are relevant to the present model of emotional self-knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Emotion events begin with some sensory input—for example, a stick in the grass. Once this stick is perceived, low-road pathways (LeDoux 1996) “casts a broad net that responds to almost anything that resembles a threatening stimuli” (Van Leeuwen 2016: 95). In the case of a stick in the grass, this low-road evaluation (step B in the present model) categorizes the percept—the stick—as something fearful—namely, a snake. In other words, the stick in the grass strikes you as at first appearing to be a snake; this “primary categorization” (94) trigger some fear response, which consists in a set of bodily changes preparing one for action in response to the fearful object (i.e. tightening muscles and increased heart rate in preparation for running). These bodily changes, finally, are experienced as the feeling of fear.

For present purposes, the above can serve as a working model of an emotion event. In addition to the emotion event, however, we should consider what role the *conceptualization* of an

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<sup>1</sup> This model can be found, with varying degrees of similarity, in discussions in Ekman (1999), Damasio (2001), and Prinz (2004), among others.

<sup>2</sup> Much of what follows concerning the timeline of an emotion event is drawn out of Van Leeuwen (2016)

<sup>3</sup> To give away the punchline slightly: the relevant parts, for our purposes, will turn out to be the emotional *object* one encounters and the emotional *feeling* one experiences. Of course, these are vague terms, with much disagreement over their precise meaning throughout the philosophical and psychological literature on the emotions. For present purposes, I simply take ‘object’ to mean ‘the thing towards which an emotion is a response,’ in the deflationary sense; if Andy is afraid of the dog, then the dog, in present terms, is the object of the emotion. I make a more nuanced distinction between a *formal* object and a *particular* object (Prinz 2004) in 2.3.

emotion plays. This is especially relevant if we want to successfully draw out what it may mean to *know* something about one's emotions. For example, it seems *prima facie* plausible that one could experience fear in just the way discussed above while failing to conceptualize the event as one in which fear is experienced.

As Prinz (2004) explains, “[w]e have conceptualized version of our emotions, and we can use these in cognitive acts . . .” (50). On the present view, emotional self-knowledge will turn out to be a conceptualized version of our emotions. In particular, it will turn out to require the application of some *emotion concept* to the object and feeling in question. My aim in the following section is to clarify this claim.

## 2.2 The Content of Emotional Self-Knowledge

I have suggest somewhat quickly that emotional self-knowledge involves the conceptualization of an emotion event, which itself involves the perception of the object, a ‘low-road’ or automatic evaluation, some bodily changes, and the perception of some emotion feeling. My aim in this section is to explain which parts of the process are necessary for a theory of emotional self-knowledge to have as an available option any practical effect on our behavior, decision making, et cetera, and which parts, strictly speaking, are not. I begin, however, by briefly discussing the important role of emotion concepts in bringing about emotional self-knowledge.

On the present view, emotion events culminate in the perception of some emotional feeling; thus the act of identifying one's occurrent emotional state is grounded in an important way in the feeling one perceives. In order for this feeling to be made meaningful, however, it seems that it must be labeled in some way that allows us to store and categorize the event in relation to (relevantly similar) emotion events. In other words, if I want to say that *this feeling* in

response to *this bear* is fear, I need to label it as such. I submit that this is done through the application of an emotion concept: FEAR.<sup>4,5</sup>

On the present view, applying an emotion concept to an emotion event involves situating it within the larger conceptual database of one's emotional knowledge. For example, it is part of most people's FEAR concept that a certain kind of terrifying screaming from another is a sign that that person is experiencing FEAR; that screaming signals fear, in this case, counts as emotional knowledge. Insofar as one has knowledge about what signifies specific emotions—that crying is (often) a sign of sadness (though sometimes of joy) or that speaking through clenched teeth is a sign of frustration—then one is able to identify emotion in others on the basis of these signals.

That we can use our emotion concepts to identify the emotions of others is not, of course, my focus here. In the case of emotional self-knowledge, then, emotion concepts single out emotion events as a specific type when they are applied to certain components of the emotion event—namely, those parts that we take to be indicators of a particular emotion. I have already said that our experience of an emotion is grounded, in some important way, in our experiencing the feeling of a specific emotion. So, on the one hand, emotion concepts are applied to the feeling in question, thereby labeling the feeling state as an emotion.

On the other hand, identification of a feeling is not sufficient for a robust, practically efficacious model of emotional self-knowledge. Just as one can correctly identify the emotion they are feeling—say, anger—by means of concept application (again, in the more deflated

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<sup>4</sup> Following much of the philosophical and psychological literature, I use the lowercase (i.e. fear) to denote the emotion event, and the uppercase (i.e. FEAR) to denote the emotion concept that is applied to the event when it is conceived of as an emotion event.

<sup>5</sup> The reader should note that I am here using 'concept' in a somewhat deflated sense, as shorthand for something like a "cognitive label." In what follows I set aside concerns regarding the exact nature of mental concepts like FEAR.



‘labeling’ sense), it seems we can also identify the emotion-causing object by applying the same concept. So, rather than generating the belief that one is feeling anger, we have generated the more complex—and, as is explored below, the more practically useful—belief that one is feeling anger about some specific thing—for example, a mother hitting their child in the supermarket.

I am thus suggesting that we gain knowledge of our emotions through a conceptual labeling act that involves the application of an emotion concept (i.e. FEAR) to parts of the overall emotion event.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, I want to argue that the only parts of an emotion event that are directly necessary for a useful account of emotional self-knowledge are (a) the feeling and (b) the object in question. In other words, in order for emotional self-knowledge to provide us with some way to improve behavior, decision making, and emotional dispositions (the argument for which is made explicitly in section 3), we need only apply the emotion concept to the feeling we are experiencing and the object we take to have triggered that feeling. In other words, it will turn out to be the case that we need knowledge neither of the evaluation nor of the bodily changes in order for our knowledge of our emotions to be useful to us.

Let’s start with the experience of feeling an emotion. Above, I held that our identification of an experience as an emotional way gets off the ground in virtue of our experiencing a certain set of feelings. On this model, I know I am angry when I feel angry *and when I identify (categorize) that feeling as anger*. If I fail to identify the feeling correct—perhaps I think I am sad—or if I fail to notice the feeling at all (perhaps it is a slight anger, or my attention is directed at something else), then I would, it seems, be incapable of knowing what emotion state I am in.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Such an act will only count as knowledge, of course, if it meets the minimal conditions for knowledge outlined above.

<sup>7</sup> Or at least, I would be incapable of knowing it directly. A friend may, for example, point out to me that I look angry, and I may take that as evidence for my being angry, and on the basis of that evidence believe that I am angry, and thus know that I am angry, all without having

So, knowledge of the emotion we are *feeling* is necessary for us to have *any* kind of emotional self-knowledge in the case of an occurrent emotion. Furthermore, in cases like remembered emotion, it will have been necessary in the past for us to have identified that emotion on the basis of the feelings it produced. Put more simply, I claim that if we want to get emotional self-knowledge off the ground at all, it will have to be in virtue of our having certain feelings in response to a variety of stimuli, feelings which we then categorize under salient emotional labels, like FEAR.

I want to say a bit more about what, exactly the feeling of an emotion might be. Antonio Damasio (1994) argues that the feeling of an emotion is “the experience of [bodily changes] while thoughts about specific contents roll by” (145). More specifically, Damasio argues that there is a constant monitoring of bodily states via a body map in the brain. When emotions occur, certain bodily changes occur (as discussed above); these bodily changes, in turn, are represented in the bodily map and, in conjunction with a mental representation of the emotion-eliciting object in question, produce the experience of emotional feelings (143-45).

As Damasio (2004) explains, feelings are a lot like other perceptions<sup>8</sup>—e.g., seeing that there is a blue coffee cup on my desk, feeling the dirt beneath my feet, and so forth. The main difference between my perceiving *feelings* and my perceiving *objects*, like the coffee cup on my desk, however, is that the object of a feeling is *inside* the body. One consequence of the object of a feeling being inside the body is that the brain has “a direct means to respond to the object as feelings unfold because the object at the origin is inside the body, rather than external to it” (91).

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experienced the feeling of anger at all. Still, cases like this seem to me to be exceptionally rare, and so in the benefit of clarity I set such cases to the side.

<sup>8</sup> See also Prinz (2004)

On Damasio's view, feelings "let us *mind the body*, attentively, as during an emotional state, or faintly, as during a background state" (159). The mental representation, or map of the body, in other words, is a *dynamic* representation, constantly tracking small changes in the body. Emotional episodes trigger large shifts in one's body map, and these shifts are processed as emotional feeling. Importantly, this makes feeling "just as cognitive as any other perceptual image" (159)

Clearly the mere identification of the feeling will not suffice. On the one hand, it's not obvious that this small bit of emotional self-knowledge could do much for us. If I know that I am angry, I may be able to, in some small sense, pay careful attention to how I talk to or behave around others. But what good is this knowledge if, for example, I can do nothing to avoid the thing that has caused my anger? In other words, if I am made angry by a classmate's style of debate, but I do not know that this is the cause of my anger, then I can do little in the way of attempting to avoid, address, or otherwise mitigate the cause of my anger. In addition to knowledge of the feeling one is experiencing, then, substantial emotional self-knowledge will also require knowledge of the *object* which triggers the emotion.

There is a certain ambiguity to what constitutes the "object" in question. On the one hand, we might say that the "object" of an emotion is the "property in virtue an event elicits an emotion" (Prinz, 62). Call this the *formal object*. On the other hand, we might mean by "object" the event that itself triggered the emotion. Call this the *particular object* (Kenny 1963). When you experience the death of a loved one, on this view, the death is the *particular object*, while the formal object—the property in virtue of which an emotion is elicited—is loss (Prinz 62). So

emotional self-knowledge may require that one have knowledge of the formal object—loss—or the particular object—death—or both the formal *and* the particular object.<sup>9</sup>

If emotional self-knowledge is, as argued earlier, a kind of *substantial* self-knowledge, then we would not want the theory itself to be too cognitively demanding. Since loss is a relatively abstract property, we may suspect that requiring the emotionally self-knowledgeable agent to have knowledge of the formal object is too demanding. Since we only need to require just those pieces required to produce the practical or prudent outcomes hinted at above, we need only require of the emotionally self-knowledgeable agent that they have knowledge of the *particular* object in question. If one is afraid of bears, it will be sufficient that they know that fear occurs in every instance they encounter a bear (since, for example, they can choose to avoid places in which they are more likely to encounter bears). In such a case, knowledge of the formal object of the fear—whatever property that may be—would be superfluous.

In terms of emotional self-knowledge as a kind of substantial self-knowledge, then, an agent need only have knowledge of the *particular* object of the emotion. Knowledge of the particular object will be sufficient to meet the practical requirements of emotional self-knowledge; this knowledge, in addition to knowledge of the feeling of the emotion in question, are thus the only two components of the emotion event that are required for a theory of substantial emotional self-knowledge.

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<sup>9</sup> One might also think that the “object” of an emotion refers to that which the emotion is directed at (i.e. I am angry *at* my friend). Call this the *intentional* object of the emotion. Since the intentional object is not, strictly speaking, part of the emotion proper, but rather what the emotion is directed at, it is not part of the content of emotional self-knowledge. Ideally, the intentional object of one’s emotion *and* the *particular* object of one’s emotion should align; if you find the death (particular object) sad (in virtue of it having the formal object of *loss*), then you will (likely) direct your sadness at the death (intentional object). Though this is not always the case, the discussion would bring us too far outside our current aim of describing the content of emotional self-knowledge.

When these two components—the feeling and particular object—are (accurately) labeled according to some emotion concept (i.e. FEAR), one gains emotional self-knowledge. But the concept, it bears repeating, is not itself part of the emotion event; rather, the application of the concept to the emotion event results in a *conceptualized*<sup>10</sup> version of the emotion. So, on the one hand, we have the components themselves—the feeling and the particular object—and we have, on the other hand, the conceptualized components which themselves constitute emotional self-knowledge when emotion concepts are applied to representations of the feeling and particular object.

Emotion concepts need not, however, be applied to both the feeling and the formal object at the same time. In fact, we often apply emotion concepts to events with any obvious feeling attached, as in when we talk about how scary a movie was days after watching it. Additionally, we can have a good grasp on what emotion we are feeling—know that we are sad—without being able to quite place what it is we are sad about. That an emotion concept like ANGER can be applied differently to these components suggests that there may be ways of having more or less emotional self-knowledge, where having less means being able to less about your emotions and the behaviors or decisions they seem to cause.

In the next section, I argue that there are three distinct levels of emotional self-knowledge.

## 2.3 Structuring Emotional Self-Knowledge

Consider the following set of claims: (A) “I am afraid!” (B) “I am afraid of the dog!”; (C) “I am afraid of dogs!” In each case, the scope of one’s emotional claims is different. In (A) there is mere reference to a feeling; while in (B) there is reference to a feeling *and* to the (particular)

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<sup>10</sup> See Prinz (2004)

object that agents takes to be the cause of the emotion. Additionally, in (C) a *disposition* is cited, where the agent claims not only to be afraid of *this* dog, but in fact afraid of all dogs. In addition, we can imagine cases in which the agent making the emotion-related claim knows *nothing more* than what he is reference. The agent who screams “I am afraid!” may simply have no idea *what* he is afraid of, despite knowing perfectly well that he is afraid. Likewise, the agent in (B) may well know that is afraid of *this* dog without knowing that he would feel fear were it any other dog as well. The agent in (C) however—the agent who is able to determine the feeling and object of his current fear but also recognize that he would feel fear were it any other—has emotional self-knowledge of his very *dispositions to feel certain emotions in response to certain objects*.

In just the way these emotion-related claims build on one another—from a claim about a feeling, to a claim about a feeling as a response to a particular object, to, at its most complete, a claim about what feeling will occur in response to *any* encounter with that particular object—I take it that emotional self-knowledge has a three-level, hierarchical structure:

- (1) *Foundational Emotional Self-Knowledge*: Knowledge of the emotion one is feeling
- (2) *Minimal Emotional Self-Knowledge*: Knowledge of the emotion one is feeling *and* the particular object of the emotion
- (3) *Maximal Emotional Self-Knowledge*: Knowledge of one’s occurrent emotion as part of the pattern in (2)—put loosely, the recognition that one’s current emotional reaction will almost certainly occur in response to any future encounters with the same particular object

In the remainder of this section, I explain each of these levels, citing some possible failures along the way, which will help set up the more thorough discussion of the usefulness of emotional self-knowledge in section 3.

### 2.3.1 *Foundational Emotional Self-Knowledge*

The first level of the emotional self-knowledge hierarchy, what I call *foundational emotional self-knowledge*, is knowledge merely that one is feeling a specific emotion, without knowing precisely what the cause of the emotion is.<sup>11</sup> On its own, foundational emotional self-knowledge is not particularly useful. If Sam knows only that he *feels* afraid without knowing what has caused his fear, there is very little Sam could do to avoid being afraid. He certainly could do nothing to avoid the cause of his fear.

Foundational emotional self-knowledge, on its own, is not necessarily helpful. Insofar as one can identify the emotion in question—fear, anger, or sadness—but fail to identify the particular object of the emotion—a dog, dirty dishes, or death—one can do little to avoid repeat instances of that particular emotion. And, furthermore, if the emotion tends to lead one to perform undesirable actions (i.e. yelling at their friend or significant other), this could lead to serious personal and social problems in one's life.

Foundational emotional self-knowledge is helpful, however, insofar as it will ground the subsequent levels of emotional self-knowledge. In other words, having minimal emotional self-knowledge requires that one *first have* foundational emotional self-knowledge.

### 2.3.2 *Minimal Emotional Self-Knowledge*

The second level of emotional self-knowledge encapsulates foundational emotional self-knowledge, but also includes knowledge of the (particular) *object* that caused one's emotional state. Minimal emotional self-knowledge is thus a more robust kind of emotional self-

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<sup>11</sup> It is not, to be clear, knowledge merely that one is in *some* emotional state. In order for emotional self-knowledge to get off the ground, we will need something more specific, something that denotes the *exact* emotion one is experiencing (or the exact emotion one takes one's self to be experiencing).

knowledge, requiring first that one have a working knowledge of the emotion they are experiencing.

Minimal emotional self-knowledge is constrained to knowledge of a single event, for it importantly does not include knowledge of one's overall emotional dispositions. Distinguishing between individual instances and general dispositions is crucial, as we will see below, because one might deny that one has some emotional disposition, despite knowing that one is experiencing that emotion at some specific time. So, for example, Sam may know that he is afraid of *this snake right now*, while denying that he has the *disposition* to feel snake-directed fear (perhaps, he will claim, *this* snake just caught him off guard, and thus it is not snakes he is afraid of *per se* but rather it was the surprising nature of seeing *this* snake unexpectedly).

Emotional self-knowledge can fail at this minimal level in virtue of either the agent misidentifying the emotion they are feeling *or* by failing to pick out the correct particular object of the emotion they are experiencing. So, for example, one may think one is angry when one is simply disappointed (and thus fail to pick out any object at all in virtue of not finding a sensible object to attach the feeling to) or one may actually be angry about one thing—the dirty dishes—and pick out the wrong particular object—the mailman who is just now knocking on your door. In either case, the negative emotion cannot be mitigated, addressed, or avoided if the failure occurs.

### 2.3.3 *Maximal Emotional Self-Knowledge*

Maximal emotional self-knowledge, in contrast to both foundational and minimal emotional self-knowledge, refers to dispositions to have certain emotions, rather than the state of being in the grips of an emotion. Prinz marks this distinction as one between *state* emotions—emotions that can persist as self-contained states—and *attitudinal* emotions. Attitudinal emotions, on his view, are “ways of construing objects or states of affairs emotionally” and as



such are “dispositions, in part, to have a certain kind of experience. Dispositional fear must be a disposition to enter fear states. . .” (180). Attitudinal emotions are, additionally, conceptualized versions of our emotions; as such, when an attitudinal emotion is activated—as when one with a snake phobia (a fear disposition) encounters a snake—an occurrent *state* emotion occurs.

So we have, on the one hand, the occurrent experience of snake-fear (a state emotion) and the disposition to have a fear experience *in response to snakes* (a fear disposition, and thus an attitudinal emotion). Furthermore, one can know that they are currently experiencing a state emotion (like fear) in response to a snake *without knowing* that they have a disposition to feel fear towards snakes—in other words, without knowing that they would experience a fear state even if it were a different snake, in different circumstances, etc. So we should distinguish knowledge of one’s present state emotion from knowledge of one’s attitudinal emotions—what I call *maximal* emotional self-knowledge.

Maximal emotional self-knowledge is knowledge that one has a certain disposition to have a certain emotional experience in response to a certain emotionally-salient object. What this means, in terms of the current structure, is that one must have a certain set of emotion events in response to the same object—emotion events that are themselves labeled according to some emotion concept. These representations of emotion events must themselves be unified in virtue of being conceptualized under the same emotion concept. Otherwise, there would be no way for an agent to cite any of their emotions as instances of a broader disposition—there would be no history, so to speak, of experiencing that emotion. In other words, the person who gets angry about dirty dishes would not be able to claim (in the sense of *knowing*) that “Dirty dishes always make me so angry!” without it having been the case that, in some number of past instances, the agent had genuinely been made angry because of dirty dishes.

If a sufficient history of similar emotion events has in fact occurred and if, in each case, the agent had *minimal* emotional self-knowledge of the event—that is, if the agent knew both the emotion they were feeling *and* the particular object of the emotion—then that agent has *maximal* emotional self-knowledge. When an agent fails to recognize that the emotion they are currently experiencing is the same one they would experience in relevantly similar circumstances, then the agent lacks maximal emotional self-knowledge, though they may very well have minimal emotional self-knowledge of the emotion event. As I will argue in section 3, maximal emotional self-knowledge is the most practically useful form of emotional self-knowledge, insofar as it not only allows an agent to cite present and past emotion (just as minimal emotional self-knowledge does) but also insofar as it allows one to cite possible *future* emotions, in a way that mere knowledge of a state emotion cannot.

## 2.4 Summary

On the present view, to experience an emotion is to perceive a set of bodily changes in response to the perception of some object. These two components of an emotional state—the feeling and the particular object—are the two necessary parts that one must know in order to have good emotional self-knowledge. One gains knowledge of these components, furthermore, when one applies a particular emotion concept to their representations, like FEAR, thereby creating a conceptualized version of the emotion event (or, in certain cases, of just the feeling of the emotion).

From these components, the argument continues, we can draw out three distinct levels of the emotional self-knowledge, which build upon one another in virtue of each subsequent level containing all the parts of the previous one *plus* some other part. The first level—foundational emotional self-knowledge—is knowledge merely of the emotion one is experiencing. This

occurs, on the current view, when one applies an emotion concept to the represented bodily state and *not* the particular object that triggered the emotion. The second level—minimal emotional self-knowledge—subsumes the foundational level and adds to it knowledge of the *particular*—rather than formal—object of the emotion. So the same emotion concept is applied to representations of *both* the bodily changes *and* the particular object in question. The final level—maximal emotional self-knowledge—is not knowledge of the particular emotion one is currently experiencing, but rather knowledge that one is disposed to have a certain kind of emotional experience in response to a certain emotional object.

### 3 PRACTICAL EMOTIONAL SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Throughout the previous section, I often mentioned the practical value of emotional self-knowledge, without being terribly precise about what that value may in fact be. In part, this is because the value of emotional self-knowledge is only made clear once we have the structure in mind. Emotional self-knowledge, I suggested, is practical useful in virtue of its to aid in our overcoming certain emotional behaviors and in virtue of the necessity of emotional self-knowledge as a starting point for the process of emotional reappraisal—roughly, the reframing of our emotional relationship with certain objects or states of affairs. In this section, I examine these benefits in turn, each of which requires the *application of* emotional self-knowledge to occur.

#### 3.1 Overcoming Emotional Behavior

Common experience tells us that we often act impulsively when we are in the grips of certain emotions. And it is often the case that these emotionally-charged actions are undesirable ones—at least in light of many of the common prudential goals we hold. For example, most people do not desire to lose their jobs for all the usual prudential reasons—they will not have money, so

they will not have goods, so they will not live well, etc. For these reasons, it seems, we are often capable of withhold a great amount of anger at those around us, even the most annoying coworkers. In extreme cases, our anger may cause us to lash out at our coworker; in more common cases, we may simply give them the cold shoulder or otherwise distance ourselves from them. In these cases Though it is an open question whether the emotion in such a case comes with a “rigid behavioral disposition” to perform the behavior or indirectly “influences the agent’s decision process by setting specific goals” (Deonna, Tappolet, and Teroni, 2015), in either case the important point is that, were it not for our coworker-directed anger, these actions—intentional or otherwise—would not have occurred.

I begin with an example: Ralph is an untenured junior faculty member at some university. His colleague, Susan, has just received tenure. Ralph envies Susan, but finds that this is not a common emotion for him to experience in response to the success of his peers. Thus, Ralph’s envy is singular, and he could, if so inclined, give in to the envy and shun Susan (adapted from D’Arms and Jacobson, 2001). To be sure, there are good prudential reasons for Ralph not to envy Susan. As D’Arms and Jacobson point out, “[o]ne reason it doesn’t make sense to envy Susan . . . is that to do so might jeopardize [Ralph’s] relations with her by fostering resentment, and eventually [he’ll] need her vote [to receive tenure]” (71).

As mentioned, the envy Ralph is feeling is not part of a pattern for him. Ralph, that is, is not an envious person, except in this instance. Suppose Ralph is in the copy room when Susan walks in, needing to use the copier once Ralph is finished. Ralph could, if he were so inclined, give in to the envy and shun Susan; perhaps he could even go so far as to change a setting on the copier to make it harder for her to use. What’s more, I submit that Ralph probably *would* do something

like that—because of his envy—if, that is, he did not know that he was envious of Susan (or if he denied or ignored his envy).

In order to avoid acting undesirably because of his envy, Ralph will need to have acquired *at least* the level of minimal emotional self-knowledge. In this instance, Ralph would have to (a) identify Susan as the cause (particular object) of his envy, (b) identify the subsequent emotional feeling as one of envy, and (c) apply the emotional concept ENVY to the event. Since colleague-directed envy is not a common occurrence in Ralph's emotional repertoire, there is no need for him to recognize his envy-response as an instance of a larger emotional disposition. In other words, though Ralph has certainly felt envy in certain situations—and has thus applied the ENVY concept to *some* instances—his envy towards Susan is a new instance in the broader, less specified ENVY concept, and so he need not it seems, have the *specific* disposition toward envy—or towards colleague-directed envy—in order to recognize that his interaction with Susan is a case of the more general envy caused by a different—and entirely new—kind of object.

So let's suppose that Ralph *does* know that he is envious, and that he knows he is envious of Susan. Now, combine that with the prudential reasons cited above—eventually, Ralph will need Susan's vote—and Ralph has good reason to not act on his envy. So, he gives Susan a warm greeting and says goodbye before leaving the copy room. Ralph has not behaved in any way worthy of reprimand, and his reputation within the department is safe.

### 3.2 Emotional Dispositions

Holding back emotional actions requires only that one have minimal emotional self-knowledge. In this section, I discuss a more complex case that will require the agent to have *maximal* emotional self-knowledge—knowledge, that is, of their emotional dispositions.

Consider another example. Claire works in a company with a constant influx of new interns, who have often in the past infuriated and disappointed Claire, biasing her towards intern-directed anger at what she perceives as the slightest misstep. The newest intern, Mark, has just arrived for his first day of work. Already, Claire is acting distant and cold towards Mark, without his having done anything to warrant such a reaction. One day, Mark is assigned to deliver a stack of papers to Claire from her boss. Upon retrieval of the documents, Claire notices that there is a page missing, and her general disposition towards anger at interns (in Prinz's term, her *attitudinal* anger) causes her to form the belief that Mark has lost the page. Infuriated, Claire scolds Mark, having no idea that it was in fact her boss who lost the missing page. Claire's belief that Mark lost the page is false, and she was biased towards this belief because of an already present disposition to feel anger at interns. Just as in Ralph's case, Claire can, if she so chooses, apply her emotional self-knowledge to bring her beliefs—and thereby her actions—more in line with her desires to not form quick judgments about others. Claire can do so, I will argue, because she can cite her knowledge as a reason for engaging in an emotional regulation process known as *reappraisal*.

Emotion regulation is “the set of processes whereby people seek to redirect the spontaneous flow of their emotions” (Koole 2009, 6). Reappraisal is a specific, cognitively-focused form of emotion regulation, most easily understood when placed along what Gross (2001) describes as a “process model” of emotion regulation. On the process-model of emotion regulation, various strategies are organized “along the timeline of the unfolding emotional response” (Gross 2003: 348). Because it occurs *before* the onset of a particular emotional behavior, reappraisal is an *antecedent-focused* form of emotion regulation.<sup>12</sup> Specifically,

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<sup>12</sup> Antecedent-focused forms of emotion regulation are contrasted with response-focused forms, such as suppression, which occur only *after* the emotional response arises.

reappraisal is focused on the cognitive aspects of an emotional experience and involves “reinterpreting the meaning of a stimulus, including one’s personal connection to it, to change one’s emotional response” (Ochsner et al. 2012, 5). So, to borrow an example from Gross, “during an admissions interview one might view the give and take as an opportunity to find out how much one likes the school, rather than as a test of one’s worth” (349). Doing so, however, would require accepting some *reason* for approaching the interview in this light (e.g. to reduce one’s level of anxiety, and thereby to improve one’s performance during the interview). Reappraisal thus involves a conscious evaluation of one’s emotional dispositions and the behaviors they seem to cause. It is in light of these evaluations that one can begin, with some effort, to engage in reappraisal.

For Claire, however, the process of reappraisal cannot get off the ground until she has *maximal* emotional self-knowledge. It is not enough, in other words, for Claire to know that she is mad at Mark in this singular situation. Instead she must a) recognize that she would feel anger if it were any other intern in a relevant situation, and that b) the anger is causing her to form rash judgments; she must also c) believe that her anger (or, at least, the behaviors caused by the actions) are undesirable (for whatever reason she ultimately finds fit) and, finally, d) willfully and effortfully begin engage in a process of reappraisal—of restructuring the emotional framework she has attached to the interns at her job. Insofar as all these conditions are met, Claire can *at least attempt to engage* in the process of reappraisal.<sup>13</sup>

It bears emphasizing that reappraisal is difficult and time consuming. And certain emotions—like phobias—are simply recalcitrant to reason, and so it is unlikely—or at least more

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<sup>13</sup> Whether or not Claire is ultimately successful will ultimately depend on a number of complex factors, including the intensity of the emotion, the environment she is in, the amount of effort she actually puts in, etc. I do not think this makes the case impossible—just difficult—though I have no precise argument for the intuition.

difficult—for any amount of conscious evaluation of one’s emotional dispositions to move one to successfully reappraise. In those quite common cases where our emotions are not recalcitrant in this way, however—in cases where, for example, we are simply nervous about an upcoming admissions interview—reappraisal *does* seem to prove an effective strategy for altering (or at least mitigating) the kinds of undesirable behaviors certain emotions sometimes bring about. And it is in such common cases, like the admissions interview, that emotional self-knowledge is most important, precisely because, with some effort, it seems we can do something to avoid many possible negative consequences (e.g. failing to answer questions during the interview coherently). Barring some limiting irrationality of Claire’s part (say, an intense hatred, which is clearly unwarranted, for all interns), I think her case is one in which emotional self-knowledge can guide one towards reappraisal.

In addition, Claire’s knowledge of her disposition to experience anger towards interns can help her better plan future events. For example, if she knows she has a meeting with a new intern in the morning, she could do a number of things to avoid letting her anger get the best of her, so to speak. She could, for example, reframe the meeting in terms of all the positive advantages of having an intern; or she could simply try to think of more positive thoughts in the moments before the meeting, in the hopes of mitigating the resulting anger. Even in the worst case scenario (where Claire cannot at all mitigate her feelings of anger), she can try, at the very least, to suppress any expression of her anger, as Ralph did in the previous section. The point remains, however, that doing any of these things requires *first* that Claire *know that she has this disposition*—again, that she have maximal emotional self-knowledge.





## 4 CONCLUSION

My goal in the preceding pages was to offer a possible structure of emotional self-knowledge—that is, knowledge of our emotions—that could ultimately help clarify the role such knowledge can play in mitigating our emotionally-charged, yet undesirable, behaviors and beliefs. I began by suggest that emotions are responses to particular objects in the world; in virtue of our evaluating these objects in a particular way, a certain set of bodily changes occurs in preparation for action. These bodily changes are represented as emotional feelings in conjunction with a representation of the object that caused them. So, when one is afraid of a bear, one has a bear representation and a representation of the bodily perturbations caused by fear, and these two components, when combined, produce the feeling of fear. I then argued that emotional self-knowledge arises when one *conceptualizes* one’s emotional state—that is, when one applies an emotion concept (like FEAR) to the emotion event. Emotional self-knowledge only requires that these concepts be applied to two parts of the emotion process: the feeling and the particular object. This, in turn, produces three separate, hierarchically structured levels of emotional self-knowledge:

- (1) *Foundational Emotional Self-Knowledge*: Knowledge of the emotion one is feeling
- (2) *Minimal Emotional Self-Knowledge*: Knowledge of the emotion one is feeling *and* the particular object of the emotion
- (3) *Maximal Emotional Self-Knowledge*: Knowledge of one’s occurrent emotion as part of the pattern in (2)—put loosely, the recognition that one’s current emotional reaction will almost certainly occur in response to any future encounters with the same particular object

At each of these levels, the scope of application of the emotion concept increases—from being applied to merely the feeling, then to the feeling *and* the particular object and, finally, to being applied across a number of instances *and* being recognized as having been applied (loosely) as such. This final level, as knowledge of emotional dispositions, is the most robust form of emotional self-knowledge.

I then argued that the application of emotional self-knowledge could help two agents—Ralph and Susan—avoid behaving in ways that would not turn out to be prudential good for them. In Ralph’s case, *minimal* emotional self-knowledge helped him avoid letting his envy of a colleague guide his actions; in Susan’s case, *maximal* emotional self-knowledge allowed her to take a closer look at her own emotional dispositions—indeed, the very one she has come to know (a disposition towards intern directed anger). Because of this knowledge, I claim, Susan is able to begin the process of reappraisal, which may, if successful, completely remove her disposition to experience anger towards interns (and, furthermore, to judge them quickly and harshly on the basis of this anger).

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